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Ghanaian Funeral:

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Episode 6 Ghanaian Funeral

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Recent immigrants from Ghana on Africa's west coast have brought with them a very different way of mourning the loss of a loved one. It's more of a celebration involving exotic costumes, high-energy music and traditional dancing. For Lewis, in Sydney's western suburbs, this spectacular occasion offers him the most appropriate way of saying farewell to his father, a man who left behind 6 wives, 26 children and 105 grandchildren.



Reporter Marie-Claire at funeral



The family receiving condolences

Well, that old circle of life, he said, just keeps turning until, of course, we reach that appointment that none of us can break. As they keep telling us, we've all got to go sometime. What happens at that point of no return varies, of course, from culture to culture, but one thing is consistent - YOU won't be taking part in the ritual, whatever it is - not a speaking part, anyway. But some funeral rituals are as much for the living as for the dead. Here's Marie-Claire Wollaston.



MARIE-CLAIREE WOLLASTON, REPORTER: A school hall in Sydney's west it may be, but the colour and energy draws on centuries of African tradition. This is nothing like a Western funeral, obviously, and I guess the question is - why? Well, this is a celebration of a long and fulfilled life. The assumption is, is that if you've lived to a ripe-old age, then that's something to be really happy



Photo of former village chief, Nana Pablah-Owusu

about, and they are! More than 400 people are here. They've come to support Nana Owusu-Mensah, otherwise known as 'Louis', whose father died in Ghana four months ago.

NANA OWUSU-MENSAH: My father's name was Nana Pablah-Owusu. He was a chief in the village called the Kwa Dominase. He was married to six wives, had 26 children and had 105 grandchildren. He was 104 when he died.

MARIE-CLAIREE WOLLASTON: Louis's home is Dominase in the Ashanti region of central Ghana. The Ashanti are part of the Akan, one of the country's five major ethnic groups. Louis's father lived, died and was buried in Dominase. Louis and his brothers and sisters are spread throughout the world, but all 26 returned to Ghana when told of their father's death.

NANA OWUSU-MENSAH: Because of the Ashanti custom, when the father died, it's the children who buy the coffin. Before he died, he bestowed to his children that wherever they are, in any country or anywhere, when they hear that he's dead they should - wherever they might be - try to sort of remember him and do something for him. He died about four months ago, and this is the time that I'm also inviting all my friends - close friends, relatives - for everybody to come so that I can actually release the pain and the...everything that I'm feeling, so it can all go away.

MARIE-CLAIREE WOLLASTON: The support starts with the funeral arrangements. One of the biggest tasks is preparing the food. The menu is almost exclusively meat - in this case, Kyinkyinga - or spicy gibblet kebabs. Traditionally, close relations of the deceased don't eat during the nine days or so of the funeral festivities, but that still leaves plenty of mouths to feed. So, Nana, how do you feel about cooking for 400 people?

NANA AFUA NTI-ABOAGYE: Oh, it's...it's something not too much for me, because I've been working with St Vincent's at Woolloomooloo with the homeless, and I'm happy also to do this job because it's my hobby. I like it.

MARIE-CLAIREE WOLLASTON: Yes.

NANA AFUA NTI-ABOAGYE: And all our sisters...during this time, all friends come and so help you to do it, not one person do it.

MARIE-CLAIREE WOLLASTON: Guests also help pay for the funeral.

ERIC TWENEBOA, GHANA ASSOCIATION OF NSW PRESIDENT: I think it's about our togetherness. That extended family of your father, extended family of your mother, and then the extended family of your mother's... You know, that whole complex structure. So, when there's a loss in a particular family, it's not just for the wife and the children or the father - it's for the whole community, as it were.

MARIE-CLAIREE WOLLASTON: Every aspect of the funeral has cultural significance, from the consoling adowa dance in praise of

the dead to the symbolic clothes - red worn by close family, white for grandchildren, while other guests pay their respects in dark colours. Of all Ghanaian rituals, the most prolific is the pouring of libation, a liquid offering made with incantations and prayers to ancestral spirits. It takes on special significance when performed at a funeral.

ERIC TWENEBOA: The pouring of the libation is to ask for forgiveness for the dead person for whatever, you know, sins he's committed. Of course, everyone has done...has committed a sin, and also to ask our ancestors to accept him wherever he is going and to give him a place to live.

MARIE-CLAIRE WOLLASTON: Although historically pagan, the funeral ritual survives, even though the population of Ghana is 60% Christian and 15% Muslim. Rituals like this pass on Ghanaian culture to younger generations, many of whom were born in Australia. But for Louis, the occasion is a final opportunity to honour the father he loved and respected.

NANA OWUSU-MENSAH: This is something that, if I do this, it will always remind me that when my father died I was able to see him off as befitting a chief, as he was, and that will always remain with me and I will never forget that.

GEORGE NEGUS: There's a lesson there, I think, from our new Ghanaian-Australians from the west coast of Africa.

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